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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000545

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SUBJECT: ARIAS CARDENAS: OPPOSITION FACES UPHILL BATTLE
WITH CHAVEZ IN CHARGE

Classified By: Ambassador Charles S Shapiro, for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)
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Summary

1. (C) Francisco Arias Cardenas, former presidential candidate and ex-Governor of Zulia, told the Ambassador February 11 that President Hugo Chavez's increased control of the military and the state oil company (PDVSA) following the events of April 11, 2002, make it unlikely that he could be forced from power in the short term. Arias lamented that if the National Electoral Council (CNE) chooses to deny a recall referendum on Chavez, opposition protests and panic would ensue. If, instead, a recall was approved and Chavez lost, any new administration would have to contend with a large minority of Chavez sympathizers, including armed fanatics. Multiple opposition parties will be hard pressed to maintain unity campaigning against the blackmail and bribes of Chavista politicians for August regional elections. End Summary.

Chavez in Control of Military: Forced Departure Unlikely

2. (C) Former presidential candidate and ex-Governor of Zulia Francisco Arias Cardenas told the Ambassador February 11 that President Hugo Chavez's solid control of the military and the state oil company (PDVSA) makes Chavez's involuntary departure from power unlikely in the short term. Arias, now head of the Union party, claimed President Chavez purged military leadership very effectively since the events of April 11, 2002, placing loyalists in key positions. Although he conceded there are still "one or two" higher-ranking officers and many mid-level officers that might support the opposition if Chavez flagrantly violated the constitution or rigged National Electoral Council (CNE) decisions, he discounted their overall significance. He said Chavez informants have thoroughly infiltrated the military, that there is no mutual understanding between officers about what events would trigger open dissent, and that there is an inclination that "this is not the right time" for such dissent. Chavez's public relations barrage, legitimizing his rule as just and democratic, and his constant, but "selective," use of the Constitution make it difficult to justify any military break with his regime. "He is a dictator with the appearance of a democrat... There is no way for the military to organize against him." Arias claimed Venezuelans have been approaching him on the street to tell him "we're depending on you," implying Arias should use his military background to oppose the GOV if the recall effort fails. But Arias said he did not have the influence in the military to provide such help.

PDVSA: Onetime Opposition Base, Now Chavez Lifeblood

3. (C) Arias claimed that Chavez was using the same methods he used to secure control of the military with the state oil company (PDVSA), a process that accelerated after the two-month national strike that started December 2, 2002. Arias found it ironic that PDVSA once led the fight against Chavez, but was now keeping him afloat by financing his "revolution." He lamented that Chavez's increasing control of the armed forces, PDVSA, and the business sector would make any future challenge significantly more difficult for the opposition than previous attempts. "The most serious problem," said Arias, "is that we do not have power anymore."

Failed Recall Will Lead to Protests and Panic

4. (C) Arias said that if the presidential recall is not approved by the CNE, there will be significant opposition protests and panic. However, many public employees and

recipients of government aid will forgo participating in any uprising for fear of losing their jobs or assistance, just as many of them decided not to participate in the signature drive calling for a presidential recall. Their fear of reprisal will be vindicated if the recall is denied, proving the GOV's power and will to impose its political will on Venezuelan institutions.

Post-Chavez Administration Should Incorporate Chavistas

15. (C) If the recall is approved by the CNE, Arias predicted a thorough defeat for Chavez. "We will show them that they are the minority." He added, however, that Chavez has significant support in poor neighborhoods and has armed his most rabid supporters. Even if Chavez leaves peacefully, the next administration will have to deal with these potentially violent extremists, as well as Chavez sympathizers in the armed forces. Arias argued that the "war would not be won" with a referendum that leads to Chavez leaving power, but rather when the opposition demystifies the Chavez revolution and incorporates the 35 to 40 percent of Venezuelans with pro-Chavez sympathies.

National and Zulian Political Diagnosis

16. (C) Arias conceded that opposition parties would have difficulty maintaining unity during regional elections slated for August as "they are all trying to protect their own space." The Ambassador agreed, adding that the opposition would have to propose an agenda beyond opposing Chavez. Arias said this was "slowly" happening, and that gubernatorial and mayoral candidates fundamentally understand that they need to campaign to improve people's day-to-day lives, rather than on the coattails of national politics. Arias was concerned that pro-Chavez politicians have been successful blackmailing and corrupting both government officials and business leaders, particularly Interior and Justice Minister Lucas Rincon, and that this will prove useful to them during elections as they offer incentives and threaten to punish those tainted by deals with Chavismo. Although there are far more opportunists than true believers in Chavista ranks, Arias cautioned that appealing to opportunism "has worked well" for the GOV.

17. (C) Arias stressed the importance of Zulia's oil resources, political significance, and the border with Colombia. Neither of the Fifth Republic Movement's (MVR) front runners for governor, Calixto Ortega or Rodrigo Cabezas (both National Assembly), have a chance of beating Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales, according to Arias. (Note: Ortega told poloff February 12 that he is confident he will win both the nomination and election. He claimed Governor Rosales is not as popular as his reputation and that the Democratic Action party will nominate another candidate, splitting the opposition vote. End Note.) GOV forces are working hard in Zulia to shore up support for the eventual nominee, Arias noted, particularly in south Maracaibo, where they are "spending a great deal of money" through government programs and outright bribery. Arias discounted the eventual success of this strategy. He proposed regional and local governments of states on both sides of the Venezuelan-Colombia border take the initiative to combat border problems, as the federal government is not addressing border problems satisfactorily.

Chavez the Great Communicator

18. (C) Arias claimed Chavez skips conventional political discourse by speaking directly to the people. He said Chavez uses baseball and religious analogies deftly to make political points, using Venezuela's two most popular institutions to strip out political complexities and opposing viewpoints. This is dangerous, considering many Venezuelans

rely exclusively on his comments for social and political information, and is one reason his supporters remain loyal. Arias lamented that it is "almost impossible" to convince Chavez's core supporters that their "savior" might be wrong about anything, but that it would be impossible for Venezuela to "go on without the Chavistas."

Comment

19. (C) Unlike many opposition leaders, Arias has full appreciation for Chavez's intellect and abilities, and his

assessment of the military's incapacity to stand up to Chavez is sobering. His analysis of the importance of incorporating Chavistas in a post-Chavez Venezuela is sound. Former Chavistas like Arias will be key to convincing Chavez's supporters that there is life after Chavez.
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